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Norman Dubie, *The City of the Olesha Fruit*

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The river remains constant, not the land. The horizon may become “unstrung” but the river is always there, “a wash or words,” “the damp seeping under the door.”

But the river suggests a more subtle and comprehensive thread running through these poems: the Orpheus myth. Just as, after they were thrown into the Hebrus River, the lyre continued to play and Orpheus’ head continued to sing, so the river for Bailey is a “speaking river” and water is “whistling water.” We “sink like stones” and “rise like young birds.” Children “learn the still/ surface float/ that would ride to a neutral current.” The roots of people are “thin wire/ searching out a radiant current.” This wire is then likened to a musical string which is playing “for a strong hand/ on space.” Even the notion of tuning gains much of its significance from the myth of Orpheus. The title suggests that these poems are Bailey’s lyre, her way of soothing the savage beast, of stopping the river’s flow. A sound, some abstract in space, is what she holds to. She says in “The Children’s Room:” “I . . . find my timing,/ feel my way in.” In this latest collection of poems, Jane Bailey has “tuned the distance from her.” She’s shunned the society of lovers, come through the Bacchanal of *Pomegranate* needing little more than a voice.

Don Schofield

The City of the Olesha Fruit

Norman Dubie

Doubleday & Company, Inc.

\$6.95, cloth

Norman Dubie’s fifth full-length collection of poems is a carefully-woven fabulist tapestry, a series of tableaux in which history, at first glance, seems rejected in favor of the drama of detail. The backdrop is night and day—their interstices, in particular—and against these,

bright patches of blue and yellow occur again and again. There is an almost moral correlation of color to part of day, as if the narrator were hoping rather wistfully to fix each detail of the world and make it static by stitching it that color. Blue pears, blue turtles, blue clay, blue rags, a blue blanket; daffodils, yellow spears of colic-root, clarified butter, yellow forsythia, goldfinches, yellow bonnets—one soon gets accustomed to the brightness and discovers with a little shock that these details are not the ones being pointed out. It is the red and black images that trouble the narrator. They occur at dangerous transitional points, between life and death as well as night and day, and stand out like raised figures: a red flag, a black and silver Winchester,

The other mural
Is a procession of animals without human companions:
The mouth of the fox holds an onion that is red like apples!

* * *

The black widow spider who nests in the corner of the barn
Beside the bales; you have named her *Obsidian*. The red fiddle
On her stomach, you tell her, is worthy
Of Chagall.

Animals are everywhere, especially barnyard animals—cows, mules, donkeys, ducks, pigs—for whom repeated drudging service or the slaughterhouse are always near at hand:

My sister here, at Yalta, goes sea bathing with a rope

Around her that runs back to the beach where it is
Attached to a donkey who is commanded by a servant
With a long switch.

The sea tows her out and then the donkey is whipped

Sorrowfully until he has dragged her back to them.
I named the donkey, Moon, after the mystery of his service
To my sister . . .

The narrators of these poems are troubled by the spectacle of history, of how one event succeeds another and inevitably repeats itself whether it's a footprint or an atrocity. This service to time becomes equated with sacrifice, which becomes a figure for love, which is the real subject of this collection.

Beneath him; free
To drag everything along behind him . . .

does succeed, like us,
In nearing a perfect exhaustion,
Which is its origin. The water

... and this loud, falling
Water is a figure for love, not loss, and

Everything must be willed out of the blackness of the specious present. The animals know this; lovers know this. "The animals had a garden party without us . . ." ". . . By the brook, nevertheless, / Two lovers embrace . . ."—despite the personae of these poems who resist these appalling sacrifices. The variable narrator cannot have his static yellow-and-blue world; he comes, at the end, to an acceptance of the mystery, of the brutal interplay of life and death: "An aspect / Of the mother must be concealed from us; that aspect / Emerges, after much thought, in the lovers she selects for us."

The people in these poems die violently, for the most part—of murder, cholera, plague, influenza, and there are no complaints. And whenever the narrator approaches a scene of death, the scene cuts abruptly, often in the middle of a thought, to something else. Again and again he turns his face away:

... and what I understood to be a large ham
That the authorities, nevertheless, declared
The torso of a male child of nine or ten. The Czar,

In their memory, placed a tiny trout pond over them
And this inscription: *A blue blanket for my little ones.*
My wife goes nearly naked to parties in Moscow.

Like the blue and yellow signposts that point the wrong direction,
Dubie's exclamation marks are naive arrows away from the sordid
reality towards some trivial detail, while the ship goes down in the
background (or Icarus drops like a fly):

Have you ever measured distances by sound;
If the steam from a ship's whistle is seen
And, say, ten seconds elapse before the sound
Is heard by you again, then *she* is just
Two miles off—entering a fog bank, I think! Mother is
Dead. She taught me the night signals of the Cunard Line.

There are three orange lights, one forward, one aft . . .

The reader cannot turn away from the brutal reality when the
narrator does, but at the same time we feel his shock as he averts his
face. It is the reader who is thus in the position of bringing the blue
and yellow hemispheres together, and who sympathizes with the
willed naiveté of the narrator not to see the blood-red disc that joins
the two halves. We wish him to see more, to solve the dilemma, and
poem by poem the narrator does. Step by step Dubie comes to an
understanding as he moves from the static tableaux of the fable to an
embrace of the round:

What does this sick girl have to do with
Our lives? That excellent man, *Rosen*, knows:

Open your eyes: there's sky, mountains; the moment
Of death is instant, contrived.

It is a stunning collection, the fabric complete.

Kathy Callaway